Alaska Aircraft History

Al Day – Director, 1946-1952

Interviewed by Evelyn (Brown) Stevens

Mr. Al Day, this is December 14, 1967. Now, when did you first get interested in having aircraft for the Bureau?

Day: Well I had been with the Bureau for many years. In fact it's all I'd ever done and I had an interest in aircraft as a part of our operations for many years but I found little fellowship among my co-workers because most of them thought airplanes were entirely too progressive and unnecessary in our work. Most of us at that time were interested in horses, camp out trips and old Ford cars, boats, and things of that sort. Airplanes seemed like a far away stretch of the imagination. There was much opposition as with anything new in the government service, but gradually things changed and came around. A few hardy pioneer souls began to buy planes with their own funds.

Ev: Anybody in particular?

Day: Two Alaskans. Clarence Rhode had to buy his own plane to start and Sam White, an agent in Fairbanks. As I recall, he bought his plane. Then I think the records would show if we could find them that probably Frank Dufrense, who was then the Director up here and who was a dog sled mush man. I think that I recall that he refused to pay the bills for the airplane. He thought it was foolishness. I think these two Alaskan planes were probably among the first in the entire Service.

Ev: What kind of aircraft were they?

Day: I haven't the slightest idea. As far as I was personally concerned, the Alaska Game Commission in those days was an almost separate entity. In the old Biological Survey we had general supervision but it was very minor. We didn't have the administrative control that came later.

My first recollection of airplanes in the Biological Survey came sometime about in the early 1940's. John Ball, who had been the refuge manager out in South Dakota had learned to fly on his own and I believe I am accurate in that John bought his own plane. Finally we began to accept a list of pilots into the organization.

Q: Was Alaska the beginning; was that the thing that brought it to mind?

Day: I would think so. Chronologically probably, Alaska was first. John Ball came into the picture with his own plane on refuge work and then we had a few wild souls who started hunting wolves and coyotes from airplanes. I took a ride with a wild pilot in northern Wyoming years ago where we shot coyotes out of a side of the airplane but it was considered foolhardy. Later in the 40's, we decided to change the general attitude about planes and they became very useful. We found that you could do more censusing waterfowl or observing waterfowl from the air than you ever could with a pair of gum boots on the shore so airplanes became useful from that angle. As I recall, the first plane that we ever got on transfer was about the first year I became Director. I promptly changed the attitude of my cohorts when I became Director of the Service. We started looking for surplus – surplus aircraft that could be picked up from other agencies without costs. A big old lumbering Norseman, became available and we immediately took it off the list. John Ball went down someplace in Georgia or Atlanta, and flew that thing to Washington. Some of the hearty souls, including myself, dared to get in it and ride it out over Chesapeake Bay. That plane was among the first to be used for waterfowl breeding expeditions up through Canada. It was a very rugged plane; much like the modern Beaver except it was cumbersome. That plane eventually ended up in the Alaska fleet.

After I came in 1946, I made Clarence Rhode the Regional Director. Of course, he thought, ate, and slept airplanes. With that combination, we went to work and began to build an airplane fleet. We finally had the finest fleet in Alaska. We found a good many of these Grumman goose models which became surplus rather quickly. They were a Navy airplane, a plane that would take the commanding officer off the big ship and fly

him immediately to shore so he could transact his business. Of those early planes, the goose was designed for work that is now done largely by helicopters. The pilots of those planes had trouble handling them and they dipped a few generals and admirals into the drink. As a result, Grumman goose became surplus rather widely and we picked them up every place we could get a chance. At that time, there were no restrictions on the numbers that we could have so we built up quite a fleet. We had some of the Widgeons which were a small model of the Goose but they went out rather rapidly because there was no replacement parts for the motors. They had a special motor. Some of them were later abandoned. Then came a period where we finally obtained some cash money for buying other planes. Many of them were light planes on skis used for wolf hunting, caribou observations, game observations, and all of those things

Ev: How did you get the money?

Day: We talked Congress out of it! We managed to convince them. The most interesting thing in my connection with this whole situation, occurred on the very spot where you and I are sitting and visiting. When I first came up here as Director in 1946, the fellows had two old ancient Quonset huts setting side by side out here on the edge of Sandy Hill (Lake Hood) and all they had were these two Quonset huts. They had boxes of surplus engines that we had obtained. They were racked up and there were piles of floats and skis that we had gotten on surplus, all out in the open. When it wasn't snowing, the wind was blowing sand into all this gear and on the fellows and mechanics, I never saw anything like it! They were working out in the cold, bitter cold weather, on scaffolds working on those motors. Their hands would freeze and they would run back in and warm up. In the summer time, they would take the motor apart and they never knew whether they were going to get a glob of sand in it or what would happen. I spent a few days with my little camera and took a whole series of colored pictures of this miserable, miserable, set up for a government agency. I took it back to Washington and got my own budget to include, I think $400,000. It was an unheard of sum to build this building that we are sitting in now. I went over to the Bureau of the Budget. I wanted to show my pictures and they hesitated but I finally talked them into giving me 30 minutes to show

them something. Sam Dodd, who was the budget chairman of our group immediately said, "O.K. Al put it in" and it went up on the Hill. It went before the Appropriations Committee. We had a very tough old codger from Oklahoma who was Chairman and crotchety, and grouchy – he's gone now, so I can talk that way – I finally got him to permit me to show my pictures and we got the full amount through the House Appropriations Committee. It went over to the Senate and I performed the same stunt there and to everyone's surprise, and mine as much as any, we came out with $400,000 to build this facility. We immediately started. We put in office space and hangar space, machines, etc., and at that time the present municipal airport here was nothing but a barrens. This was the only facility out at Lake Hood at that time.

So it has always been very gratifying and as long you're interested in trying to pull this material together, I'll make you one little Christmas promise. As soon as I get home and have time, I'll go through some of my old files and I'll send you those original pictures that show what a horrible, miserable, facility that these fellows were working under. If it hadn't been for the spirit that they always had up here, they wouldn't have taken the punishment and the beating that they did to stand out there in freezing weather and then in hot windy, sandy, weather in the summer, repairing those planes. It was a great tribute to them.

Ev: Do you remember any of the names of those mechanics?

Day: No, I don't know when Smitty came with you. I believe he was one of them. Clarence Rhode was head of the aircraft division even before he became Regional Director. I think he was Director of Aircraft and then we branched out into the fisheries. That was a struggle because most fisheries people thought that you couldn't do anything except on a big ole lumbering boat and of course the private fishermen had faster boats and they could run away from everything that we had. We finally talked the fisheries branch, and at that time I was in charge of fisheries and well as wildlife, so they didn't resist too much. We got them using airplanes and they found it was the best enforcement tool that we had. The pilot could fly along behind a hill and suddenly jump over the hill

and down on a fishing boat in closed waters; snap a few pictures and go on his way. Several fine cases of illegal fishing convictions were made on that type of a thing.

Then there was the Goose. The amphibians began to be useful for ferrying people back and forth and carrying supplies up to the fisheries installation at Karluk Lake. In fact, Karluk Lake was one of the old experimental stations for fisheries. Practically the entire equipment including lumber, cement, wire, everything that went into Karluk Lake was flown up in one old Grumman Goose that ferried back and forth from King Salmon. They became more useful. We found that you could actually get a good reading on the densities and runs of salmon, particularly in the red salmon areas, where salmon come into the lake and cluster in the clear water at the mouth and the little side streams before they go up to spawn. You could actually fly over and photograph and count the number of salmon and establish key observations and estimates from airplanes. They became more and more useful all the time. Clarence always had a yen for a DC-3. I don't know whether he ever got it or not. So you say, he did finally get a DC-3 and it went to the Bureau of Land Management after Statehood?

Ev: At the maximum, before Statehood, do you have any idea how many planes were in the fleet?

Day: When I get back, I'll be going to Washington and I will see John Ball. He should have or can put his hands on all of this early information. We will find it for you.

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The following doesn't need to go on the tape but it is kind of an interesting little story about an Alaskan airplane. It was a Piper Cub, I believe, that was outfitted with floats for John Ball to fly to Alaska. He came up through Canada, flying inland. You can fly a floatplane from Washington to Fairbanks and Juneau if you know what you're doing. This plane was in Washington. We had a meeting with the Outdoor Writer's Association at a lake up in Maine, - Winnebago, I believe. I was going up to this convention and I had my boy, who was about 12 at that time. He had never been in an airplane. He had

begged me to go along, so John Ball, myself, and my son and our gear, we stashed into this little Cub with an extra seat and flew this floatplane up to the lake. The lake was about 2500 feet elevation. When we went to take off, we couldn't get the darn thing off the water. The prop hadn't been properly adjusted so we circled and circled and left a big wake on the glassy water and we bounced enough so we could get up in the air and started up and we got around New York with all the smoke and fog and my boy started waving at the kids on the ground, making faces at them and having a circus. It got awfully nasty and those big electric power lines and radio towers looked bad to me and pretty soon we came over this nice beautiful body of water – lake. John said, "what'll I do?" I said, "set this so-and-so down!" We landed on this lake and soon you could hear fire engines screaming on the side roads. An old guard came flopping through the brush wearing rubber boots. Well we had landed in the Westchester Reservoir which supplied the drinking water for the city of Philadelphia! We taxied up to the shore and soon a wild-eyed policeman came down through the poison ivy, which was about three feet high. It started to rain. John told him we couldn't go and leave the plane here, he said, "we thought somebody had drowned in our Reservoir." That is what they were worried about. They were afraid they wouldn't find us alive in their Reservoir. We finally got out and Dick (my son) and I caught the train back down to Washington. John was weathered in for three days before he could get that Piper off the Westchester city water supply.

Ev: How many times have you been to Alaska?

Day: I was up here every summer while I was Director. We did it deliberately because we changed the regulations. Formulating the fishing regulations originally had to go back to Washington to be signed by the Secretary. In 1946 when I became Director, we immediately changed that and the Secretary was glad to be rid of it too. We made it so the Director could sign the changes. So I came up and spent every summer to be on hand to help manage the salmon and other commercial fisheries.

Ev: You must have done a lot of flying around.

Day: Yes, we flew all over Alaska and had many, many experiences with Clarence. I flew with some of the other fellows but mostly with Clarence. I never did manage to get up on the Brooks Range. We had to stay fairly close to the fishery projects. I've been everywhere else in Alaska except the Arctic range. It has been most enjoyable and I always keep fond memories of Alaska with me.

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